

Brooks Building

223 W. Jackson Blvd.

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in September 1980
Recommended to the City Council on February 10, 1983



CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
J.F. Boyle, Jr., Commissioner



Above: The Brooks Building is located at the southeast corner of Franklin and Jackson streets. This photograph dates from the 1930s, when an "L" line still ran behind the building along Quincy Street.

Cover: This photograph of the Brooks Building's upper stories highlights its unique vertical piers, which are composed of clusters of long narrow columns. The piers are capped, at the cornice, by "bursts" of ornament set against a background of green terra cotta.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. Recommendations concerning specific landmarks are sent to the City Council following an extensive staff study, such as the one summarized in this report. The "significant historical and architectural features" of a proposed landmark are identified in the final designation ordinance approved by the City Council.

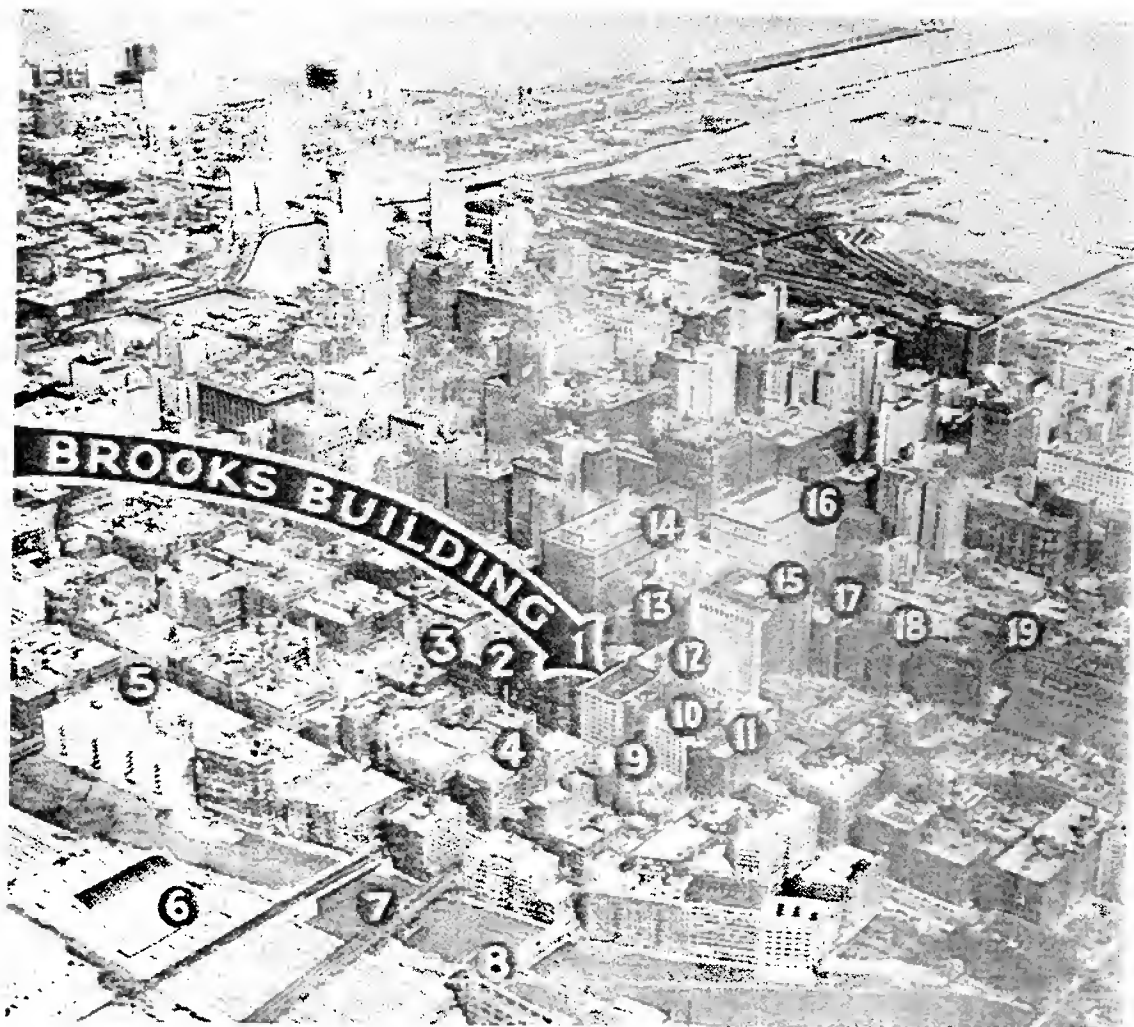
BROOKS BUILDING

223 W. Jackson Blvd.

(1909-10; Holabird & Roche, architect)

The BROOKS BUILDING is a remarkably intact example of a Chicago School-style structure, an architectural movement of international importance that developed here between the 1880s and the early 1900s.

Notable for its finely detailed terra cotta ornament, large windows, and minimal walls, it epitomizes the early steel-framed skyscraper -- a type of building for which Chicago is world renown for creating. It was commissioned by Boston developers Peter and Shepard Brooks, who built many of Chicago's most innovative structures. It was designed by Holabird & Roche, who were instrumental in the Chicago School of architecture.



An aerial view of the Loop, c.1920, which appeared in a marketing brochure for the Brooks Building. The map touts the building's proximity to such attractions as: Union Station (6), the Quincy Street "L" line (7), the Insurance Exchange (15), the Federal Building (16), and LaSalle Street Station (19).

Brooks Building

223 West Jackson Boulevard

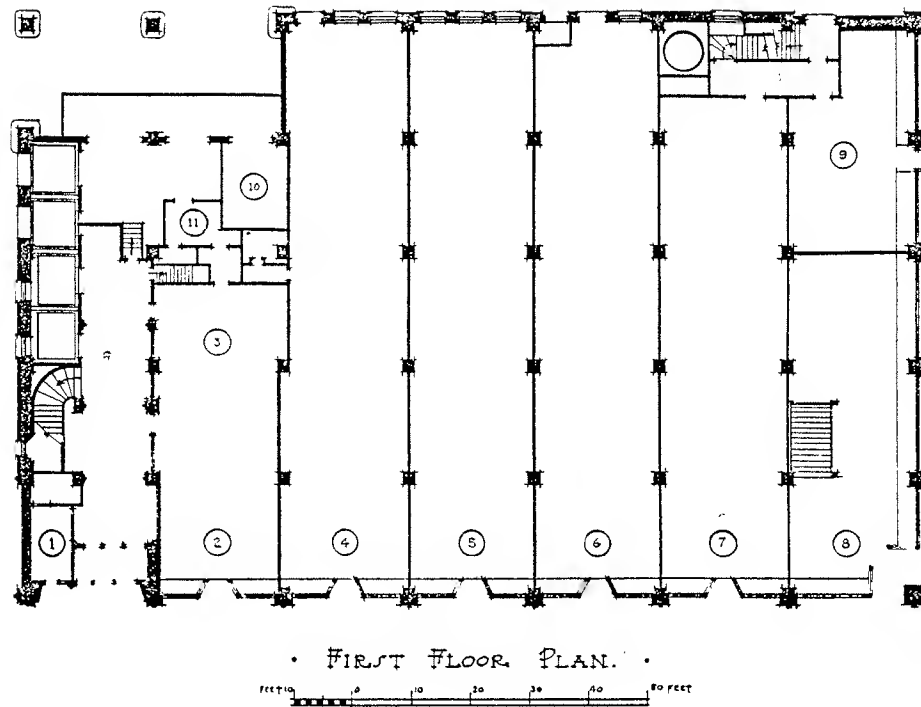
Architects: Holabird and Roche

Dates of construction: 1909-1910

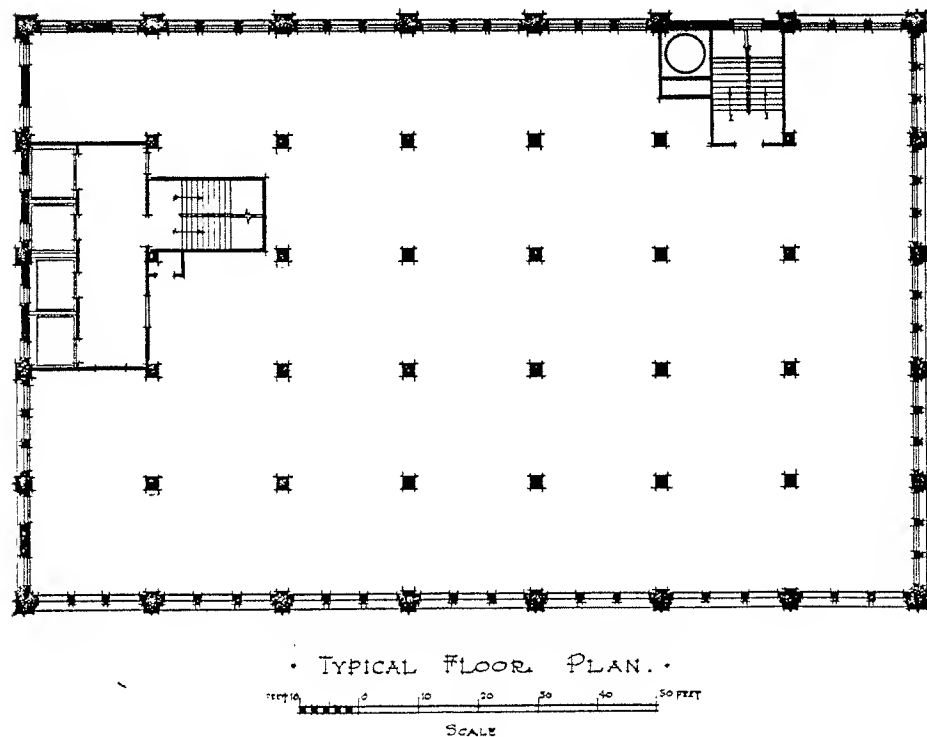
A note about the Brooks Building in a 1910 issue of *The Economist*, during construction of the building, mentioned that most of its interior space was already rented. Promoted by its managers as being “in the heart of Chicago’s wholesale district,” the Brooks served both retail and wholesale tenants by providing wide, open floors where walls could be easily erected or moved in response to tenant needs. Although the Brooks Building was apparently popular with potential occupants in the year of its creation for its functional interior, the exterior form of the building was the last of a kind. The vivid clarity of its structural frame, encased in orange-brown terra cotta, is a hallmark of the Chicago school of architecture which developed during the 1880s and 1890s, and which subsided in popularity as architectural fashions changed during the first decade of the twentieth century. Designed by Holabird and Roche, one of the pre-eminent and most prolific firms whose designs for tall commercial buildings created the Chicago school, the Brooks Building is an excellent example of the characteristics of the movement. Holabird and Roche, among others, sought to realize the potential of a new building technology and concurrently sought an appropriate aesthetic expression for its novel forms. The Brooks Building can be seen not only as the final statement by Holabird and Roche of the Chicago school idiom in its purest form, but also the final work of the Chicago school in general, at least until the reassertion, beginning in the late 1940s, of certain principles first elucidated by the original architects of the Chicago school.

The Developer

The Brooks Building was the final project in Chicago of a Boston developer, Peter Brooks, whose commissions in Chicago included some of the most significant structures



The Brooks Building was designed to serve both retail and wholesale tenants, providing wide-open floors where walls could be easily erected or moved in response to tenant needs. *Above:* A floor plan of the ground floor, which was divided into retail storefronts, with the main lobby at the lower-left corner (off Jackson Boulevard). *Below:* A typical floor plan for the building's upper eleven stories, showing how the elevators were located at one end of the building (left-center) in order to create large spaces with windows facing three streets.



of the Chicago school. Brooks, initially in conjunction with his brother Shepard, began his ventures in Chicago in 1872, working through an attorney in Chicago, Owen Aldis, who soon became exclusively Brooks' agent. This first building, the Portland Block, was designed by William Le Baron Jenney. Holabird and Roche received their first Brooks commission in 1886 for the Tacoma Building. Neither of these two structures still stands, but the Rookery Building, the Monadnock Block, and the Marquette Building survive as examples of this important collaboration between an Eastern developer, his agent, and local architects (all three buildings have been designated Chicago Landmarks). Holabird and Roche designed the south half of the Monadnock Block in 1893 and the Marquette Building in 1894.

Brooks was very particular about the type of building on which he would spend his money, and he was concerned about every detail of construction. He wanted utilitarian structures that cost as little as possible. How much his desire to save money on his projects influenced the design of the buildings and contributed to the development of those features which are now found noteworthy as the achievements of the Chicago school of architecture cannot be determined precisely. The major achievement of the Chicago school was in creating straightforward, utilitarian commercial buildings, and Peter Brooks provided the means for some of the most significant expressions of that ideal. He was seventy-eight years old when the Brooks Building was commissioned, and he had been investing in Chicago for thirty-seven years. Appropriately, this final project was given his name.

The Brooks Building

The twelve-story Brooks Building is located on the southeast corner of Jackson Boulevard and Franklin Street. The wider Jackson Boulevard facade is divided into seven bays, and the narrower Franklin Street facade has five bays. The steel piers that separate the bays are faced with rounded terra-cotta molding, with the corner piers emphasized by a heavier cluster of molding. Recessed spandrels below windows, window frames, and mullions are also faced with terra cotta. On the two lowest floors, however, distinguished from the upper ten by a projecting stringcourse, limestone rather than terra cotta is used to cover the structural frame. The window frames of the ground-floor storefronts are metal.

Inside the building, the elevators are arranged along the east side, abutting an alley, so that each floor can be open across the width and depth of the building with windows on three sides. This type of flexible space was made possible by the use of steel framing as a means of supporting the weight of the building with the least amount of interior obstructions. Because the skeleton frame distributed the floor loads evenly across the site, the outer walls could be as open as the interior, thus providing large windows for light and air. In the Brooks, a variation of the typical Chicago windows is used: here the wider central pane as well as the two outer panes within each bay are double-hung and can be opened. All the Chicago school buildings were marked by a system of construction and a

design orientation that recognized and provided for the possibility of change to meet shifting needs. In its completely adaptable interior, the Brooks Building pointed towards the commercial architecture that was to follow it forty and fifty years later.

In the exterior appearance of the Brooks, the supporting steel framework is clearly delineated. The cage-like integration of horizontal and vertical members is enhanced by the unusual color of its terra-cotta cladding and highlighted by the sparing use of decorative elements. Most of the ornament is confined to the top of the structure, in a heavy cornice and in the details that mark the intersection of the piers with the cornice. Set against a background of flat green terra-cotta panels, the termination of the strongly vertical piers is a cluster of curving floral forms set into squares. These same squares appear in a smaller size below the end of each pier, on the underside of the stringcourse between the second and third floors.

The uncommon placement and shape of the cornice ornament seems to derive from the 1898 collaboration of Holabird and Roche with Louis Sullivan. Holabird and Roche were designing the third of three buildings at 18, 24, and 30 South Michigan Avenue. Sullivan augmented this small building, only three bays wide, with his particular and unique ornament above the first floor (now gone) and at the top of the two central piers in two dense bursts of ornament. On the Brooks Building, the ornament was handled more lightly; it does not compete with the bold lines of the piers but rather serves to contain those lines visually.

The Architects

William Holabird, born in New York state in 1854, and Martin Roche, born in Cleveland in 1855, began their architectural training in Chicago in the office of William Le Baron Jenny. In 1881, they formed their own office with O.C. Simonds. Two years later, Simonds left the new firm which then changed its name to Holabird and Roche. William Holabird was the more outgoing of the two men, serving as business partner for the firm as well as engineer. Martin Roche was the chief designer although the two often shared this responsibility until the number of their commissions required the creation of a larger staff. With such buildings as the Tacoma, the Marquette, and others, Holabird and Roche introduced a broad range of practical as well as structural innovations in their designs while they continued to clarify their conception of an appropriate aesthetic for the unprecedented form of the highrise building. Their buildings of the period from 1900 to 1910 are not as well known as their earlier work, but these designs form a transition between the innovation of their early buildings and the increasingly traditional appearance of their work from 1910 through the early 1920s.

The Brooks Building is perhaps the least well-known of these transitional buildings. Already in 1905, in their design for the Chicago City Hall and County Building, constructed in two stages between 1905 and 1911, historical forms were taking precedence over the innovative style of the Chicago school. The McCormick Building, also con-

structed in two stages between 1907 and 1912 at Michigan Avenue and Van Buren Street, was designed in a restrained classical style, much simpler than the City Hall and County Building with its monumental six-story columns. During the same period, Holabird and Roche designed the Chicago Building in 1905 and the Oliver Building in 1908, both of which use the steel frame as the primary design feature but have historical details applied to the facade. The Brooks Building was a return to the idiom of the 1880s and 1890s, perhaps reflecting Peter Brooks' history as a Chicago developer who wanted what had served him well in the past. The Brooks Building may have looked old-fashioned in 1910. Its location in a part of the downtown business district that has not been prominent until recently may also have contributed to the lack of attention given it.

The Brooks Building was once advertised as being in the heart of a manufacturing district. The manufacturing district moved elsewhere, and the composition of the Brooks Building's tenants has changed. A list of tenants in the 1941 Chicago Central Business and Office Building Directory shows that most were in the clothing and related businesses. Today's tenants are in banking, insurance, and other service fields. The remodeling of its entrance and lobby, and the replacement of the storefront window frames with a contemporary material has not detracted from the original design. Its integrity has been preserved through the years. The significance of the Brooks in the architectural history of Chicago is found in both its typicality and its originality. The exterior expression of the internal steel frame, the wide three-part windows, and the open floor plan are features that characterize the Chicago school's creation of the modern office and commercial building. The use of terra cotta as a covering material is also common in the work of the Chicago school. However, Chicago architects favored the natural red or reddish brown unglazed terra cotta or, more often, white glazed terra cotta. The Brooks is a rare example of a color other than white, and the use of green terra cotta to set off the top of the building is unique. The ornament placed against the green surface is in the same way a unique decorative scheme, borrowing from Sullivan's example but simplifying it. In its internal adaptability and its exterior appearance, the Brooks Building exemplifies the achievements of the Chicago school and demonstrates the continuing interest and viability of many older structures in the city.

APPENDICES

Criteria for Designation

When the Brooks Building was first recommended for landmark designation in February 1983, the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks noted that the building met “designation criteria” 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7 of the Municipal Code of Chicago.

Since that time, a new landmarks ordinance has been approved by the City Council. Based on a review of the revised criteria, as set forth in Section 2-210-620 of the Municipal Code, the Brooks Building is seen as meeting the following criteria:

CRITERION 1

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Brooks Building is an excellent example of the Chicago School, an architectural movement of national and international importance that developed here between the 1880s and the early 1900s. The Brooks Building is a remarkably intact illustration of the technological and aesthetic innovations in architecture that resulted, forming a significant and valuable part of the city’s heritage and culture.

Although many of the city’s most important Chicago School buildings have lost their distinctive cornices or been drastically altered at the ground level, the Brooks Building’s unusual cornice is still intact, and its storefronts and entrance are only slightly altered.

CRITERION 3

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Brooks Building was the final commission in Chicago by Boston real estate developers Peter and Shepard Brooks, who were responsible for the creation of many of Chicago’s most important and innovative buildings. Through their local agent, Owen Aldis, the Brooks brothers began building in Chicago in the 1880s.

Three designated Chicago Landmarks owe their existence to the Brooks brothers--the Marquette, Rookery, and Monadnock--but this is the only building that carries their name. Furthermore, as the last of the Brooks' projects in Chicago, it is a dramatic example of the principles which they promoted in all their commissions.

CRITERION 4

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

The Brooks Building is an excellent example of the steel-framed skyscraper, a form of construction that was developed in Chicago in the late-19th century. Moreover, the distinctive design of the Brooks Building embodies the Chicago School, an architectural style that influenced the development of modern architecture--not only in the United States but around the world. The Chicago School is described in every textbook on the history of architecture, and the Brooks Building is one of the last buildings to have been designed in this style.

Particularly notable, in addition to the building's clearly expressed steel-framed construction, is its orange-brown terracotta cladding, distinctive vertical piers comprised of clusters of tall narrow columns, and exceptionally intact and finely-ornamented green and orange-brown terra cotta cornice. The building's significance has been well documented, dating back to 1972 when it was first recommended for landmark designation by the Advisory Committee to the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks.

The Brooks Building, according to architectural historian Carl Condit, who has written several notable books on the Chicago School, "is architecture that has a real visual drama about it, an architecture that enhances, intensifies, and dramatizes the ruling geometry that is given to the architects by the underlying iron or steel frame."

CRITERION 5

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

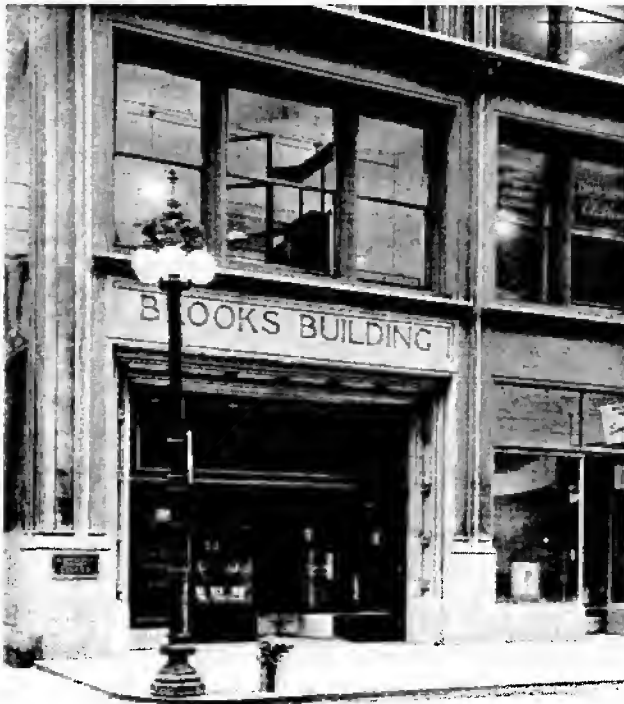
Holabird and Roche, the architects of the Brooks Building, played a major role in the development of the Chicago School, a movement that influenced architecture worldwide in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The firm's founders, William Holabird and Martin Roche, began their architectural training in the office of William le Baron Jenney, before forming their own office in 1881 and developing a long list of important buildings, including: the City Hall-County Building and Marquette Building.

The Brooks Building is one of the last and most important buildings of the firm's first important period of architecture, according to architectural historian Martin Tangora, who says it is "certainly among the five most important" remaining buildings designed by the firm.

Significant Historical or Architectural Features

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks identifies which features are most important to the significance of the proposed landmark. In addition to informing the owner and the public, this identification helps the Commission carry out its permit review responsibilities: to evaluate the effect of proposed alterations to "any significant historical or architectural feature" of the landmark or landmark district (as required by Section 2-120-770, 780 of the Municipal Code).

The recommended significant historical and architectural features of this building are the Jackson Boulevard and Franklin Street exterior elevations and their rooflines.



The Jackson Boulevard (main) entrance to the Brooks Building, c.1930. The "electrolier-style" streetlight, shown here, formerly lined many of the city's boulevards, including Michigan Avenue. They were removed in the 1950s.

Acknowledgments

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Other photos and floor plans: courtesy of Brooks Building

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This Richard Nickel photograph of the Brooks Building dates from the 1960s. The building is little changed from its original appearance (see photo on inside front cover), retaining both its original cornice and much of the character of its lower two floors, which are clad in marble.

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